The translator's word processor

by Peter Arthern

After many years when the specific needs of translators and linguists were ignored by word processor manufacturers, the notion of a "translator's work station" is these days very much in the air. A committee has been meeting since the matter was raised at the 1985 Aslib Translating and the Computer conference with a view to drawing up specifications. The Digital Equipment Corporation is conducting a survey of translator's requirements. In the United States, LinguaTech have been developing software in this field (their research director Dr Alan Melby wrote a paper on The Translators' Work Station some two years ago). And Ian Johnston (see page 26 of this issue) writes about work being done in Dundee.

In the article on this page Peter Arthern looks at where the attempt to draw up specifications has got to.

The steering committee for the "Translator's Word Processor" project is working with renewed enthusiasm now that the project is sponsored by *Language Monthly*. We have been joined by two new members with long experience of word processing – Robert Clark, who was one of the first freelance translators to use a word processor systematically, and Pamela Majorcas-Cohen, who has been involved in the study and development of 'translator work stations' in an international organisation.

While waiting for further completed questionnaires to arrive in response to the article "The search is on for the translator's word processor" in the April issue of *Language Monthly*, some initial conclusions can be drawn form the replies already received in response to mailings last December and January.

A total of 59 completed questionnaires were received, and our respondents have been thanked personally. We hope they will continue to follow the development of the project month by month in the pages of *Language Monthly*. Some people wrote very detailed and helpful comments on the questionnaire, or on the whole subject and word processing, and we hope they will agree to continue corresponding with us, as a circle of advisers.

Of the 59 questionnaires, 12 came from people working in government translation services in the United Kingdom or other west European countries, five from industry or translation companies, 26 from freelances already using word processing equipment, and 12 from prospective users, mostly freelances. There were four replies which were irrelevant.

The 26 freelances already using word processing equipment employed 16 different types of word processor or computer between them, as follows:

Amstrad PCW 8256	7
BBC micro	3
Dataword	2
Olivetti	2

and one each of Advance 86b, Commodore 64, Compaq Portable 512K, Data General Mainframe, Futura FX20, Logica, Nascom 2, OEM, Screentyper, Panorama PTC, Sinclair QL, Wordplex WPX2, Xerox 860.

The fact that Amstrad has the highest number of users in this group reflects the success which the firm is having with their PCW 8256 and now undoubtedly with their more powerful model, the PCW 8512. As one respondent wrote, "The PCW 8256 is cheap, and for someone who has little or no experience of word processors, this is important, since it means I can use it to experiment, and find out what my needs are."

What is certainly true is that these Amstrad machines are to word processors what the original Ford "Tin Lizzie" was to motoring. They have enabled many people to get their hands on a word processor for the first time, but the present models at least are not the ideal 'Translator's Word Processor'.

Another pair of respondents to our original mailing considered that we are wildly misguided in attempting to work out a detailed specification for a translator's word processor with a view to getting it out on the market. Instead, they feel we should produce well-researched advice on how to choose a word processor, making no attempt to identify a 'best buy'.

My personal response is that this must certainly be the way we should work initially. We are not going to produce a set of perfect specifications overnight, if ever. We can, however, start now with a few basic rules which would be of some use to people thinking of acquiring a word processor this month.

With further replies to our questionnaires, further correspondence with particularly experienced and communicative colleagues, discussions with hardware and software specialists etc., we shall rapidly refine our set of criteria against which potential purchasers can judge the equipment they have in mind until – who knows? – we may have manufacturers asking us if they can make "our" word processor!

To close on a practical note, what are the very basic points which a translator should bear in mind if he is contemplating acquiring a word processor?

First of all, remember that a word processor consists of three principal "bricks": the visual display unit (VDU) or monitor, which incorporates the screen on which one sees the page (or part of it) which one is typing, and sometimes the word-processing computer itself; the keyboard, like a typewriter keyboard but with extra keys which are used in controlling the specific word processing functions like moving blocks of text around, editing the text to produce italics, bold type etc. when the text is printed; the printer, which may be of various types, i.e. dot-matrix, daisy wheel, ink-jet and now laser printers.

Many requirements in a translator's personal specification for "his" or "her" word processor will affect more than one of these "bricks". For example, the character set which a translator needs can only be obtained by suitable combinations of the functions of all three "bricks", monitor, keyboard and printer.

Some specific questions which you should ask yourself (or the salesman) if you are considering buying a word processor for producing translations are as follows:

1. **What do my customers want ?**

a) What quality printing, e.g. camera-ready text
b) A particular type or type size
c) Non-English characters
– other languages
– mathematical, scientific symbols
d) Customer-related glossaries?

2. **Can the word processor meet these requirements satisfactorily ?**

3. **Does my work involve repetitive texts ?**

– If so, how easy is it to store the repeated phrases
– How easy is it to get them out of store and incorporate them in new texts?

4. **Do I find the screen display stable and pleasing? Does it strain my eyes?**

Most word processors have green characters on a black screen. Others have black characters on an amber screen. It is well worth having several makes demonstrated in order to check this vital point.

5. **Is the keyboard physically big enough?**

A frequent comment on the Amstrad PCW 8256, for example, is that the keyboard is too cramped. Sit down and try the feel of several keyboards too!

6. **What quality work does the printer produce ?**

Some printers may produce different qualities at different speeds.

7. **How fast is the printer ?**

8. **How noisy is the printer ?**

9. **Can the printer print a selected page from a whole document, or only a whole document at a time ?**

- The answer to this question may depend on the printer, or on the software, or on a combination of both.

10. **How easy is it to learn to operate the equipment? Are the manufacturer's instructions clear and direct ?**

For example, one of our respondents reports that after less than two hours of demonstration, both he and his wife were using their machine to their entire satisfaction without further tuition.
By contrast, another writes (not about the same machine):
"I found the manual very misleading: it took two of us two days and a lot of bad language to get to the end of the section entitled 'Your first twenty minutes'."
Ask other people what their experience has been with the type of equipment you have in mind.

The above list will have to suffice for this month, although it only approaches the equipment from "outside", in very basic terms. However, if you consider these questions, you will have some frame of reference with which to guide the salesman's demonstrations, in your efforts to balance cost against performance.

In closing, we must emphasise that, at this stage at least, we are only trying to provide a guide for translators who are contemplating buying a word processor. We rely on your help and your comments to enable us to refine the guidelines and to go into ever-increasing detail until we do at least have the specifications for the perfect translator's word processor, whether or not it is ever put on the market.

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